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The women's political organization paralleled that of the men. It consisted of the main Women's Council, also known as the General Assembly, and different levels of women's associations, known as *Otu* or *Ogbo*, which often served as interest groups for their members. Membership was on the basis of age, marriage, or social status.

The Women's Council was the central governing body for the women. Meetings were called whenever an issue requiring general or immediate attention arose. It was mandatory that each lineage or extended family be represented at every meeting. As such, the women of a lineage usually appointed a delegate to represent them.

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such an honor, providing food and refreshments for women attending the meeting. Men were not welcome at the women's gatherings.

The Leader of the Women

The Women's Council meetings were chaired by the leader of the women. In some communities, she was called the Omu (the great mother). In others, she was called Ogene Nyanya, or simply *Onye isi umunwanyị* (the women's leader). "The women's leader was often one of the oldest and most respected members of the female community," says historian Kaneme Okonjo. "The office was attained by merit; it was not hereditary."³²

The leader's other duties included performing certain community ceremonies, disciplining the women of the community, representing the female population in the larger village meetings, and advising women in times of personal conflict or family crises. Okonjo explains:

Because of these invaluable responsibilities, the Omu's qualifications included having good sense and good character, possessing the ability to speak well, a persuasive personality and some degree of wealth.

These leadership skills were important since she did not rule by issuing commands or making decrees.

Her authority rested in her ability to reach a consensus with the women of the community on all issues and on her skills at negotiating with the men on issues that affected all members of the community.³³

The Women Advisers

The women's leader ruled the women and represented their interests to the larger community with the advice and help of a select group of women known as Ilogo, or Otu

Separate but Equal

The political setup of traditional Ibo society functioned along gender lines. Men and women had separate political institutions; women's organizations paralleled those of the men and were considered as powerful. In her essay "Recovering Igbo Traditions," philosopher Nkiru Nzegwu describes how the system worked.

"The political culture of the Igbos could be theoretically described as dual-sex. Under this structure, women had their own Governing Councils—Ikporo-Onitsha, Nd'inyom—

to address their specific concerns and needs as women. The councils protected women's social and economic interests, and guided the community's development. The dual-symmetrical structure accorded immense political profile to women. . . . The socio-political structure required and depended on the active participation of women in the community life. Their views were deemed critical, not because they were women, but because of the special insight they brought to issues by virtue of their spiritual, market and trading duties and their maternal roles."

A modern Ibo chief displays the traditional dress of the women's leader. Considered the Omu, or great mother, the women's leader attained her position through merit rather than heredity.



Ogene. These women advisers consisted of the most prominent women in the village—women who, like the women's leader, came from prestigious and respected families. They were also known for having good character and good sense, having achieved high status and wealth through hard work, and for possessing the ability to speak well and not be easily intimidated. As one Ibo woman, Ulunwa Odimba-Nwaru, describes,

The qualifications of both the women's leader and members of her advisory board

show that traditional Ibos rank eloquence, diligence and good sense as three of the most significant prerequisites to social and political authority and the good life.³⁴

Spiritual and Protective Leaders

Most villages regarded the Omu and members of her cabinet as *Ndi amuma* (prophets and seers). According to Ikenna Nzimiro, an Ibo professor of sociology and anthropology,

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"they were said to dream of spirits who come to them warning of dangers and demanding certain rituals." Consequently, the women performed seasonal rituals aimed at driving evil away from their villages. They prepared special charms to ensure the safety and well-being of all persons attending the marketplace. The charms were also meant to ensure market expansion by attracting traders and goods from other areas and preventing market disorder. "In this way, the Omu and members of her cabinet served as spiritual and protective leaders of the entire community."³⁵

Before the Cock Crowed

Whenever a special meeting was called or a regular meeting was scheduled, it was the re-

sponsibility of the Omu or her representative to call the women together. Very early in the morning on the day of the meeting, before the cock crowed to signal the beginning of a new day and all was quiet, the women's leader took her *Ogene* or *ekwe* (gong), and walked through the village. She beat the gong in a special way as she announced the time and place of the meeting, to which everyone listened carefully. One Ibo woman explains:

Using the *Ogene* as a tool for communicating messages was such a part of the Ibo traditional life that whenever the gong beat, people stopped whatever they were doing and paid attention. The message preceding the gong beat could be a matter of life and death for the people. So they listened.³⁶

An Ibo marketplace on the banks of the Niger River in Onitsha, Nigeria, bustles with activity. Traditionally, the Omu and her advisers supervised the female-dominated markets and worked to ensure their prosperity.



At the meeting, the women's leader and her advisers would present the topics to be discussed. These could range from news of a recent threat to the life of the community to mundane topics such as keeping the markets clean, clearing the paths leading to the markets, and determining rules of market behavior, prices for commodities, and fines for those who violated the rules or failed in their responsibilities. Issues relating to men's village responsibilities were also discussed, such as directing and disciplining young men, clearing forest paths, and performing necessary repairs to public buildings.

"A Case Forbids No One"

Every adult female attending the women's meetings was entitled to speak on any or all of the issues presented for discussion, as long as she had something to say that the others considered worth listening to. As the Ibos say, "A case forbids no one." Any woman was free to

completely disagree with others' views or offer a different perspective on the issues. "Other delegates, however, considered it their responsibility to shout down, dismiss, or completely ignore somebody whom they deemed a trouble-maker or 'an idiot,'"³⁷ states historian Margaret Green. Decisions reached at the meetings were by majority consensus. And because of the respect given to the council, resolutions were binding on everyone in the community, male and female alike.

The women delegates had the responsibility of passing on the decisions to the women who could not attend the meeting and also to the men, if the rules affected them. The women's leader and her cabinet considered it their duty to make everyone comply with the rules. "Although men were not allowed to attend or participate in the women's deliberations, they rarely ever questioned the decisions reached by the women," states anthropologist Sylvia Leith-Ross. This may be partly due to the fact that they trusted the integrity of the women. They also knew that the

The Mother of the Community

In his article "The Political Institutions," Kaneme Okonjo cites an interview he conducted with a newly installed Omu of Obamkpa, a community that is currently trying to revive traditional Ibo values.

"My child [speaking to Okonjo], the Obi is the head of the men, and I am the head of the women. I and my cabinet represent the women in any important town gatherings and deliberations. If decisions arrived at are such that the womenfolk are to be told about them, I get a woman [onye oga] to sound the gong [ekwe] to assemble the women. On less important occasions, my

cabinet members pass the word around among the women by word of mouth.

If there is drought, we curse whoever caused it. If there is sickness and people are dying, my cabinet goes naked in the night with live brands to curse whoever brought it. If there is sickness next door [in a neighboring community], I do something with my cabinet to insure that sickness does not enter this town. There are medicines we make at the entrance to the town. These are just a few of my duties. I am the mother of the people, you know, and I have to insure in any way I can that they enjoy continued good health and happiness."

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"One can always hear men dismiss some of the 'outrages' committed by women with the phrase—'Obu Umunwanyi nwe anyi' (It is the women who own us)."⁴¹ Women defended themselves by invoking the power and sanctity of motherhood and their role as food producers. Collectively, says anthropologist Jack Harris

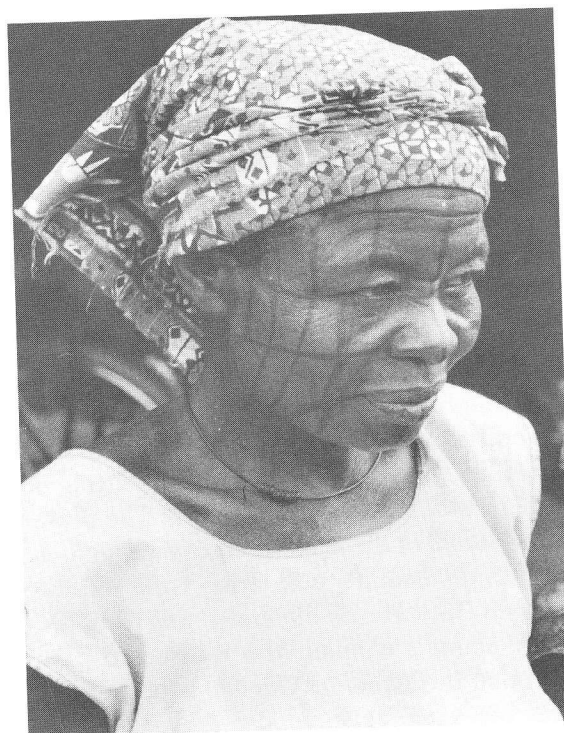
during strikes, boycotts, or sitting on a man, the women assume the role of Ibo womanhood and [are], in effect, saying: "It is we women who give birth to men. It is we women who feed them. How dare you do an injustice to a woman."⁴²

The Women's Associations

Working hand in hand with the Women's Council were the interest groups or women's associations. Issues affecting only a small section of the female population were not handled by the General Assembly, except in cases of extreme altercations among the people involved or when the council felt compelled to intervene for the peace of the community. Minor or individual problems were handled within several established women's organizations, each of which played a different vital role in the community. There were four major groups: Ndi Lolo (titled women), Otu Umuada (daughters of the lineage), Ndi'nyom (wives of the lineage), and Umuagbogho or Umuegbede (the young, unmarried daughters of the lineage).

Titled Women

"Title holding or Ichi ozo in Iboland was the highest social status a man or woman could attain through diligence and hard work,"



In traditional Ibo society, female citizens were governed by the Women's Council and the various women's associations.

states Professor Ikenna Nzimiro. "Ichi ozo in effect tells the entire village community that an individual deserves recognition and respect."⁴³ Therefore, titles were nontransferable and nonhereditary. One had to earn it.

There were three major ways women could obtain a title. A village could pull its resources together and confer a title on a woman in appreciation of the work she had performed for the community. Children could bestow a title on their mother to show their appreciation and love. Finally, a prosperous woman, with many descendants, could register and legitimize her success by taking a title. "Title holding rites of passage were both rigorous, expensive and arduous,"⁴⁴ notes historian Elizabeth Isichei. The ritual involved, among other things, paying a huge fee to the

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members of the club and providing elaborate entertainment and food to all members of the village on the day of the ceremony. Thus, few women were willing to undertake the task on their own.

"Women who took titles, either as a result of community or individual effort, were considered political and social elites,"⁴⁵ says Nzimiro. They were considered leaders and given great respect. When they spoke, everybody listened. The women's leader and members of her cabinet almost always came from this distinguished association. Women title holders were called Ndi Lolo. To indicate their achievement, they wore a special red cap and locally made stone anklets and necklaces, and they carried a fan. "Titled women were recognized anywhere by their appearance,"⁴⁶ notes one historian.

Daughters of the Lineage

The Otu Umuada represented the most powerful women's group in a lineage, consisting of all married daughters of the lineage. Even though traditional Ibo society was patrilocal (all daughters were expected to marry and move to their husband's community), women still retained rights and responsibilities in their birth communities. As such, every married Ibo woman had two homes—one in her village of birth, the other in her married community. She visited her birth home regularly bringing gifts and, sometimes, information from her married home. The Umuada had special prerogatives by virtue of their dual homes. Explains Nzimiro:

They acted as diplomats between the two communities of relationship, as ambassadors of good will for their birth communities, and, in times of crises, as

informants against their places of marriage. . . . The Umuada's allegiance were almost always with their fathers' home. Most women would rather divorce their husbands and return home than betray the interests of their place of birth.⁴⁷

Strong allegiance to their places of birth made Umuada "resident outsiders" in their husband's home. But it gave them great influential authority within their natal homes. A brother was not permitted to get married without first informing and receiving the approval of the Umuada. The Umuada were also called upon to settle disputes within the

Although Ibo women relocate to their husband's homes after marriage, they retain rights and responsibilities in their natal communities. These women are known as the Otu Umuada, or daughters of the lineage.

